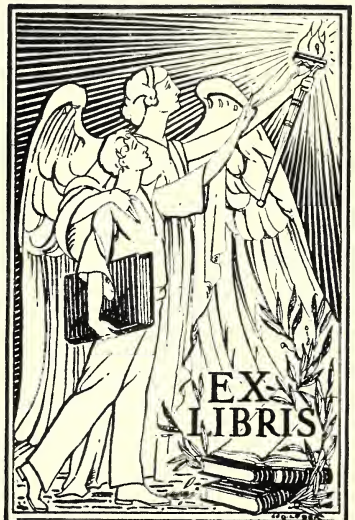
LIFE SKILLS: BASIC SELF-HELP FOR THE DEAF-BLIND (COMMUNICATION, MOBILITY AND OTHERS.)

By

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Life Skills: Basic Self-Care for the Deaf-Blind
(Communication, Mobility, and Others)

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Life Skills: Basic Self-Care for the Deaf-Blind

Because of the dual nature of the handicap of deafness and blindness, which deprives an individual of the two primary senses of sight and hearing through which one becomes aware of environment and gathers knowledge of the world at large, deaf-blind people have problems of communication, mobility, and other daily living skills that are unique and make independent living more difficult to achieve. Independence for these individuals is definitely a relative thing, because they are far more dependent on the assistance of others for the essential activities of everyday living than any other disabled group. Even the best adjusted and most highly motivated deaf-blind person cannot avoid this dependence on other members of society for assistance, and will experience frustration when needs are not met or activities are limited because the necessary assistance is not provided. This is particularly true for a deaf-blind person who has a total loss of both sight and hearing and a lack of understandable speech, a condition which is intrinsically isolating and increases dependency.

Communication is unquestionably the basic skill a deaf-blind person needs for any degree of independent living, as it provides direct means for social exchange of ideas and for expression of needs. It has always been my belief that, whenever possible, a deaf-blind individual should learn to use as many communication methods as his capacity will allow, and essentially those which are in most common use, such as the one-hand manual alphabet for the deaf, the printing of single block letters on the palm of the hand, braille, typing, and the use of alphabet cards and other communication devices. The more familiar one becomes with various communication skills, the more likely it is that he will have greater ease of access to daily social interaction. And if the deaf-blind person posesses understandable speech, he should be encouraged to use and develop it.

I would like to stress the importance of deaf-blind persons learning to read block print traced on the palm of the hand, as the majority of the general public are familiar with this communication method and will use it with a deaf-blind person when it is properly explained. I have found it very helpful to type out a card explaining that I am deaf-blind, and that the other person should print on the palm of my hand with a fingertip. But one needs to be careful, too, as some people use ballpoint pens for this purpose - with the result that the messages are hard to erase!

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Some deaf-blind people find it difficult to read print in the palm of the hand. In such cases, a simple alphabet card, showing both print and braille alphabets, can be very useful and convenient. It should also be noted that there are other methods of communication in use such as the alphabet glove and Tellatouch, which some deaf-blind persons prefer.

In recent years a great deal of interest has been shown in developing devices so that deaf-blind people can communicate over the telephone. Currently, the American Telephone and Telegraph Company has a device which enables a person to send Morse code signals over the telephone, so that they can be received by feeling a small vibrator which transmits the signals tactually. This device is very similar to the Tactile Speech Indicator, a small, compact, battery-operated portable device that also has a small vibrating disk that can be activated by voice signals for transmitting Morse code. The TSI has the advantage of convenience, being very light and portable; it also has the advantage that a deaf-blind person who has speech can ask questions over the telephone and receive coded yes and no responses.

One of the newest telephone devices for the deaf-blind is the braille teletype machine, called TTY. Built into a large attache case, it can be coupled to a telephone, and messages can be typed out on a regular typewriter keyboard and sent to deaf persons who also have TTY machines adapted for the deaf. The deaf-blind user receives messages spelled out in braille characters on a paper tape. Because there are now police and emergency centers which have TTY machines for communication with the deaf, this device can be very useful to a deaf-blind person living independently in case of emergencies. However, the braille TTY is expensive, and most deaf-blind persons cannot afford it unless the cost is subsidized by an agency.

In addition, the Helen Keller National Center is presently developing a telephone device called Telebraille, which uses a braille cell. Telebraille has not as yet been field-tested, but it shows promise for future use by the deaf-blind.

There is no single device currently being used as a telephone ring alert. Deaf-blind persons with partial sight can install lights to tell them when the telephone is ringing; those who have no usable vision can use fans. While on this particular subject, I would like to point out that there is also no special doorbell in current use, and that many deaf-blind people use either the light system or fans to tell them when the doorbell is being rung. In my own home, if guests are expected, my wife and I leave our door open for the visitors. The Helen Keller National Center hopes to develop a small device, called Wrist-Com, which, if

perfected, will serve both as a doorbell signal and telephone ring alert.

Another serious aspect of independent living for the deaf-blind is mobility--the ability to travel freely and safely within the areas in which they live. I would like to emphasize several factors that are of prime importance if a deaf-blind individual is to achieve maximum personal freedom in moving about his environment. Living accommodations should be chosen carefully, with a view to ease of access to local transportation and shopping and services; there should also be good pedestrian traffic in the area for assistance in crossing streets. The deaf-blind person should become familiar with the use of the long cane in traveling, and even an individual with some residual vision should carry a cane for safety. In addition, the deaf-blind person should be familiar with landmarks within the area most frequently traveled, such as peculiarities in the sidewalks and fronts of buildings, so that he can orient himself to specific locations of places he wishes to visit. It is also important to know the hazards and obstacles along the route of travel--bad pavements, driveways, steps, overhangs, and trees and poles.

I feel that deaf-blind travelers should use canes several inches longer than those usually used by hearing-blind persons, because the additional length provides a greater safety margin. I would also suggest that they carry cards or buttons stating that they are deaf-blind, which they can show to passersby when in need of assistance. Some deaf-blind persons carry whistles which they use to get attention from the public when they stand too long at a street crossing without being offered assistance.

Shopping can be a serious problem for a deaf-blind person who lives alone, particularly supermarket shopping. In the past, I would type up a list which I would give to the manager of the local supermarket, and the order would be delivered at the end of the day just before the store closed. Unfortunately, most supermarkets no longer provide home delivery service, which often makes it necessary for someone to accompany the deaf-blind shopper when there is heavy marketing to be done. With practice, a deaf-blind shopper can identify most cuts of meat, fruits and vegetables tactually; but unless there is some useful residual vision, he will need assistance in selecting canned and packaged goods. It is essential that canned or packaged items be carefully separated or marked, otherwise the deaf-blind person will have to be satisfied with potluck!

Shopping for personal items such as clothing also requires that the deaf-blind person have some one assist him in making good selections. This can be accomplished

by having a friend accompany the deaf-blind person, or by depending upon the good taste and judgment of a reliable store clerk. Coordinating most items of clothing is not difficult because there is such a variety of weaves and textures, or there may be identifying features such as cut, number of buttons, or general design that will be helpful. There are, of course, instances where materials may have the same texture but different colors, and these items must be color-coded to identify them. For the purpose of color coding, there are available small braille metal labels, or one can use small staples or clips located in inconspicuous places. However, I still recall the day I went fishing, wearing one red and one white sock. and when a friend asked me where I had gotten such a peculiar pair of socks, I told him I had another pair just like them at home!

I am assuming that any deaf-blind individual planning to live as independently as possible has been well trained in daily living skills. Such a person must at least have a general knowledge of self-care, homemaking, travel techniques, communication skills, cooking and fundamental home maintenance. Personally, the only specialized devices or aids in use in my home, other than the telephone devices I have mentioned, are a special clock and vibrator for waking up in the mornings, and a few measuring tools marked in braille.

There are probably individuals who may need more specialized aids, and many of these can be obtained from the American Foundation for the Blind and other sources. However, I believe that it is preferable that a deaf-blind person should try to use standard equipment wherever feasible, and not become too dependent on specialized devices.

But no matter how capable and confident a deaf-blind person may seem, the limitations and restrictions of the dual handicap of deaf-blindness are always present, and we must admit their existence realistically. Most deaf-blind people will need to depend on others, to a greater or lesser degree, for many of the ordinary activities of daily living. In most instances, they will need help in reading printed materials, for crossing streets, for doing heavy shopping, or in case of emergencies. We must also admit that the severity of this handicap will always narrow the scope of an individual's overall social and recreational opportunities, and that no matter how well adjusted and busy the individual may be, there will always be periods of frustration when the feelings of isolation and loneliness will be intense. Although in recent years there have been brighter prospects for deaf-blind people and a greater interest in their welfare, the term "independence" will always have a relative meaning for the deaf-blind.

I believe that there are three basic devices that are needed by a deaf-blind person who lives alone: a dependable doorbell device that will permit a deaf-blind person to move about an apartment or home freely; a dependable telephone ring alert device; and a telephone device that can be used by most deaf-blind persons. But even if these basic devices were available, they would not greatly minimize the real need for assistance in many areas of living. Such devices would merely make living a little easier and more bearable, but would never supplant the necessity for human contact and companionship.

There are a number of suggestions I would like to make from my own experiences as a deaf-blind individual. It is true that in many respects I have been more fortunate than others who share the same handicap, but the everyday problems all of us know as deaf-blind people are just as obvious and acute for me as for others.

1. There is a need to share knowledge and technical information regarding research into the problems of the deaf-blind, and the deaf-blind themselves should be acquainted with progress.

2. Means should be established for making aids and devices needed by the deaf-blind more available to them at reasonable cost or through subsidization.

3. More voluntary services are needed to assist deaf-blind people with the problems that limit them in functioning independently because they require sight and hearing for solution.

We stand at the edge of tomorrow, and the future is still not very clear for many deaf-blind people. But we can hope that tomorrow will bring a greater share of independence to these people who though severely disabled, have a right to human dignity.

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